



STRATEGIC PLAN FOR RURAL INDIANA

Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs
Effective 2023-2024

Vision

The Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs works with communities to build relevant and economically thriving places where people want to live, work and grow.



STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Strategic Framework: History and Background

In 2017, OCRA completed a 13-stop listening tour to hear feedback from regional partners, stakeholders and constituents across rural Indiana. Each had a vested interest in furthering community and economic development in non-metropolitan communities. The information gathered during these meetings shaped the Strategic Framework utilized by OCRA for the next two years.

The feedback revealed consistent themes relating to the challenges faced by rural Indiana communities. These obstacles included: access to broadband, the addiction crisis, housing shortage, the workforce skills gap and aging water infrastructure.

OCRA's **Strategic Framework** aligned these challenges with the agency's programs and place-making efforts by focusing on five key areas:

1. **Provide opportunities and programs focused on people and place-based investments;**
2. **Expand OCRA's role as a Center of Excellence;**
3. **Build capacity of rural leadership;**
4. **Support economic growth and preservation in the downtown and commercial districts; and**
5. **Facilitate strategies to address rural infrastructure access.**

Collaboration and partnership among rural communities are crucial in order to grow opportunities, take care of its people, and truly take it to the next level.

The framework's **Guiding Principles** supported the idea of working collaboratively to attract, retain and develop talent in Indiana's rural communities. Additionally, where possible, it supported the attempt to address the challenges identified during the listening tour by inciting and encouraging regional collaboration.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Strategic Framework: Where We Are Now

Rural Indiana is the next great economic frontier. Those are the words of Lt. Gov. Suzanne Crouch as she travels Indiana. And there is a reason for her outlook. A study by Ball State University commissioned by the Office of Community and Rural Affairs in 2022 shows that many Hoosier counties are primed for success. How our agency develops plans to enhance that potential is critical.

OCRA remains committed to continuous improvement, and to ensuring we are consistently serving the most current needs of rural areas. Since 2021, our Strategic Framework has provided a foundation for making rural Indiana as strong as it can be by encouraging collaboration amongst its people. It is a living document that measures progress and makes adjustments in response to changing dynamics, which is vital to its success.

Building on the successes and challenges of our previous Strategic Plans, our 2023 framework focuses on building capacity of rural leadership, supporting economic growth and preservation in the downtown and commercial districts, and facilitating strategies to address rural infrastructure access.

Throughout OCRA's 2023 framework, meeting the needs for rural communities is the top priority. For example, developing more opportunities for the Indiana Main Street program supports the goal of allowing communities to increase their capacity and allow our vital downtown areas to prosper.

OCRA's Community Development Block Grants are expanding to meet the need for quality housing by developing the Owner Occupied Rehabilitation program and the Recovery Housing program. Continued growth in the Indiana Connectivity program will expand broadband access to the most underserved Hoosiers, and as a result, will improve the connectivity and quality of life for these citizens.

Rural Indiana is indeed the next great economic frontier, and we believe each of these programs further advances this belief as they can be transformational for rural Indiana.

Denny Spinner,
Executive Director

OCRA

Office of
**COMMUNITY &
RURAL AFFAIRS**

Guiding Principles

Retain, attract and develop talent
in Indiana rural communities.



Incite and encourage regional
collaboration and holistic rural
planning processes.

Facilitate transformative
investment in rural commercial
corridors and support healthy,
economically resilient
communities working to address
inequity.



For more resources visit our webpage
<https://www.in.gov/ocra>

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

1. Provide opportunities and programs focused on our people and place-based investments - In order to encourage population growth, rural communities must collaborate and prioritize initiatives to improve the quality of life for current and future residents. Strong community development programs create engaging, vibrant places where people are motivated to stay, grow, live, work and play.

1.1 Create a smaller-scale grant opportunity for communities to spearhead quality of life efforts.

Building off the successes of previous quality-of-life grants, OCRA will work to develop a smaller-scale grant program for OCRA Downtown Affiliates and Indiana Main Street communities. This program aims to enliven the street for pedestrians, attract more customers to existing businesses, market available commercial properties, and promote Indiana downtowns to prospective businesses. OCRA will continue to emphasize the value of partnerships with this program. Additionally, this program will give communities granting experience while increasing local organizational capacity to apply for and to administer other grant funds.

Partners: TBD

Timeline: Q4 2023

1.2 OCRA will expand on its capacity-building programs by engaging in efforts to build regional capacity. This will help ensure equal access to capital investment opportunities and incentives available to communities.

OCRA will work with previous designees and relevant stakeholders to reimagine the Stellar Communities program. A new Stellar Communities program will continue to include a regional component, build off past successes in both the HELP and Stellar programs, and include the entire Lieutenant Governor's Family of Business and other relevant State agencies in the process.

Potential partners: PCRD, BSU (ICI), Civic Lab, IU CRE, Ivy Tech, Dept. of Ag, IHCD, IDDC

Timeline: Q4 2023

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

1.3 OCRA will relaunch its Recovery Housing Program to increase the number of diverse, meaningful housing choices available for individuals with substance use disorders on a path to recovery from addiction.

The Recovery Housing Program (RHP) provides funding for communities to create stable, transitional housing for individuals in recovery from a substance use disorder. Cross-sector partnerships are central to the success of RHP. OCRA will work with Indiana Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA) to develop new partnerships and to expand technical assistance resources available for local providers and communities to promote the achievement of program outcomes based on lessons learned from the 2021 RHP pilot.

Potential partners: partners: FSSA Division of Mental Health, Indiana State Dept. of Health, USDA_RD
Timeline: Q2-Q4 2023

1.4 OCRA will continue to support the rehabilitation of Indiana's aging housing stock in rural communities by adding the Owner-Occupied Rehabilitation Program (OOR) to its regular menu of programs.

OCRA recognizes the role of the OOR program in meeting the state's affordable housing needs. OCRA will use information gleaned from both OOR pilot rounds to encourage greater use and effective administration of the program in rural communities for the benefit of Indiana's aging and disabled residents. This includes the development of strategic, workable solutions to any regulatory challenges identified and the expansion of OCRA's current library of technical assistance offerings for local decision-makers, housing professionals, and homeowners who may rely on this assistance to keep Indiana's existing homes in livable condition.

Potential partners: HUD, IARC, Local housing agencies
Timeline: Q1-Q3 2023

2. Expand OCRA's role as a Center of Excellence - OCRA has the privilege of working with rural communities across Indiana. This provides the opportunity to collect ideas, successes and best practices. Sharing this information, connecting regional approaches and expediting solution implementation establishes OCRA as a trusted resource for rural Indiana.

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2.1 Implement more opportunities to celebrate communities engaged in comprehensive planning and development.

OCRA will create opportunities for the lieutenant governor to recognize grant recipients and successful communities. Large celebrations recognizing annual awardees will be held at the Statehouse, or a different venue will be determined based on the size of the audience. CDBG and CDBG_CV funded projects will be featured on OCRA's webpage and during grant administrator updates to promote the creative use of CDBG funds and to highlight the work of local stakeholders who have meaningfully impacted the lives of low-income residents in rural areas. OCRA will also create a strategic process to celebrate Historic Renovation Grant Program recipients once projects are completed. New Main Street communities at the Aspiring IAMS and NAMS levels will also be invited to participate in a "fireside chat" with the lieutenant governor, both to celebrate their accomplishments and to share their plans and goals for the future of their downtown commercial districts.

Potential partners: Lieutenant governor's office, Rural leaders, Main Street organizations, Legislators and Media

Timeline: Ongoing

2.2 Expand OCRA's partnerships with other associations to improve offerings and to develop new, sustainable community planning processes to support public, private, and philanthropic investment.

OCRA will collaborate with DHPA and Indiana Landmarks to add an educational track to the Statewide Historic Preservation Conference for Indiana Main Street. Additionally, OCRA will offer NOW conference scholarships to 19 Indiana Main Street communities in 2023. The Indiana Main Street program will offer an intensive, one-to-two-day training on business recruitment and economic vitality in partnership with Main Street America. This training will be open to all organizations with an Indiana Main Street designation. OCRA will collaborate with USDA-RD to conduct an ongoing series of meetings that help address the long-term solutions to rural infrastructure planning and development. OCRA will explore new opportunities to reengage with other states and national organizations for the purpose of growing agency funding expertise and to support common community development interests with an emphasis on CDBG.

Potential partners: IMPA, MSA, COSCDA, HUD, USDA-RD, IFA

Timeline: Q4 2023

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2.3 Share OCRA program's success and impact through GIS Mapping and other storytelling initiatives. OCRA will host Regional Conferences around the state to engage community and economic development professionals.

OCRA will collaborate with IARC to tell the story of OCRA's funding impact on the regions, along with their role in future regional investment. OCRA will also partner with PCRD in presenting the Digital Equity Regional Solutions Sessions. The sessions will include a time of celebration for successful community programs and present lessons learned by leaders of those communities. OCRA will release a quarterly podcast where the executive director will host a guest speaker and discuss OCRA programs, efforts and the local and state impact. Podcast guests will include local community members, field experts and elected officials. OCRA will also show the impact and reach of its programs through various GIS mapping tools. OCRA will host regional conferences, bringing program information, updates and networking opportunities to community and economic development professionals throughout Indiana.

Potential partners: PCRD, IARC

Timeline: Q3 2023

2.4 Further staff education and development.

OCRA community liaisons will present a staff training on how they can make their work meaningful to their communities. Topics will include Fostering Regular Communications, Passionate Service, "What Drives Me", compassion, developing an empathetic and inclusive attitude, and focus on the potential of each community.

Potential partners: TBD

Timeline: Q4 2023

3. Build capacity of rural leadership - The challenges in rural communities are increasing in frequency, complexity and intensity, emphasizing the need for effective rural leadership. While self-sufficiency is important, connecting leaders provides the foundation for a strong collaborative network, capable of sharing ideas and addressing multi-faceted issues together. Cooperation to achieve jointly established priorities helps leverage the assets each party brings to the table, making the most of the region's resources.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

3.1 Adapt INeGMS and CRM platforms to improve procedures for OCRA management of resources to ensure the best results for our communities.

OCRA's electronic grants management system and customer relationship platform are tools that can be used to relate timely concerns and to celebrate victories of collaboration and work in communities. OCRA will continue its commitment to improving both systems, adding additional programs, making enhancements as needed to improve communication across divisions, ensuring consistent delivery of services, and building better relationships with communities. Continuous improvement will be ongoing.

Potential partners: Grant Services, ISDA, IOT

Timeline: Q1 2023

3.2 Develop more opportunities for Indiana Main Street programs focusing on shared downtown revitalization efforts.

Encourage knowledge-sharing between Main Street communities to increase the capacity of local organizations, through social media discussions, Lunch and Learns, Community Exchanges and conferences. Pursue more collective opportunities for transformational projects and help communities successfully apply for higher levels of the Indiana Main Street Program. All IAMS and NAMS communities will have completed Transformational Strategy training by the end of 2023, which gives them the necessary training to meet the new Main Street America accreditation standards.

Potential partners: MSA, Indiana Landmarks, Indiana Humanities

Timeline: Ongoing

3.3 Incorporate strategic support for planning efforts to support local community decisions.

The three cohorts selected for the Hoosier Enduring Legacy program will complete their Strategic Investment plans by Quarter 3 2023. OCRA will begin to assist them through the next phase of the program, where they will prioritize and execute projects from their Strategic Investment Plans.

Potential partners: MSA

Timeline: Q3 2023

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

3.4 Improve resources available to OCRA-certified Grant Administrator's to enhance community-based knowledge of Community Development Block Grant procedures.

OCRA will enhance its support of certified grant administrators (GAs) through a comprehensive update of its CDBG Handbook and existing GA policy. These updates will provide clear guidance on common procedures related to CDBG awards and GA certification requirements. OCRA will also continue to build up the number of OCRA-led interactive trainings and technical assistance resources available to GAs as a way to encourage knowledge-sharing between rural communities, grant administrators, the state CDBG program team and grant services.

Potential partners: IARC, ACEC, HUD, GS
Timeline: Q3-Q4 2023

3.5 Succession Planning Sessions for Rural Communities.

OCRA will develop and present a series of collaborative sessions among rural leaders that will encourage impactful mentoring and open problem-solving engagement among rural communities. The sessions will focus on developing working relationships among rural leaders that encourages collaborations and process development.

Potential partners: IUCRD, Ball State, PCRD, AIM
Timeline: Q2 2023

4. Support economic growth and preservation in downtown and commercial districts - Downtown and commercial districts are a visible indicator of community pride, along with its economic and social health. Downtowns also help define a community's identity through distinctive, often historic architecture; shops and restaurants; and community gathering places. Maintaining the places that make a community unique, contributes to a sense of place and neighborhood identity.

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4.1 Establish a program supporting historic preservation principles to encourage economic development in downtown corridors.

Given the success of the PreservING Main Street pilot program, OCRA will establish this program as part of its regular menu of programming. Additionally, OCRA will develop a smaller scale historic preservation façade grant program for ODAN communities, utilizing a set-aside of the Historic Preservation Grant Fund. The program will be aimed at building the capacity of ODAN communities and establishing them as a resource for economic development in their communities. OCRA will also work with Ball State University's Graduate Program in Historic Preservation to develop Graduate Assistantship program that would provide design services for a pilot community.

Potential partners: Indiana Humanities, Indiana Landmarks, MSA, Ball State University's Graduate Program in Historic Preservation
Timeline: Q3 2023

4.2 OCRA will fund Downtown Revitalization Plans as part of the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Planning Grant program to promote revitalization as a core component of rural economic development in Main Street communities,

Eligible communities may apply for CDBG planning dollars to create holistic revitalization strategies for their downtown Main Street districts. OCRA will update and redesign the current minimum plan requirements for this activity type to more to effectively promote both the physical and economic renewal of the district.

Potential partners: TBD
Timeline: Q1 2023

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

4.3 Redesign the Main Street Revitalization Program (MSRP) to strengthen collaboration between local governments and rural main street organizations.

OCRA will review its MSRP program to encourage designated Main Street communities to implement long-term, holistic community development efforts and sustainability in their Main Street business district. Changes to the program's architecture and future funding allocations will be based on stakeholder feedback and a comprehensive evaluation of past performance.

Potential partners: HUD, MSA, Grant Services, MS Midwest Coordinators Group, BSU ICI

Timeline: Q4 2023

4.4 OCRA will expand support for Covid-19 Response Program grantees through the development of new standard reporting procedures and resources related to local program income.

Program income describes any revenue generated from a CDBG or CDBG_CV funded project. Communities that received CARES Act funding to create revolving loan programs for the purpose of retaining jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic must identify program income so that it can be properly managed and documented. Guidance will be developed to ensure program income is treated consistently and in compliance with all applicable regulations. OCRA will also identify ways to better utilize available flexibilities and waivers related to the use of CDBG_CV funds to expand the impact of any future programming or awards made.

Potential partners: Local administrators, HUD

Timeline: Q2 2023

5. Facilitate strategies to address rural infrastructure access - Rural Hoosiers need adequate access to water, energy, land, public health services, broadband, education, etc. to attract and retain the best talent. Lack of access to any one of these can limit the opportunity for communities to improve and sustain their social and economic well-being. With the limited resources at their disposal, it is vital for rural Indiana communities to choose the best investment projects and ensure all available resources are used in the most strategic, cost-effective manner.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

5.1 Reward communities already addressing rural decline to encourage and reinforce success.

The agency will adjust its CDBG program scoring matrices to improve the accuracy of objective measures used, to build alignment with other common sources of infrastructure funding, and to incentivize resources for communities committed to learning and evolving for the better. Changes made will recognize community achievements in addressing rural decline and establish an entrepreneurial system of rewards in support of both past and future efforts. The CDBG team will engage in strategic outreach ahead of implementation to promote local support and adoption of these changes.

Potential partners: IU Business Research Center, IARC, HUD, Rural Affairs Working Group

Timeline: Q3 2023 – 2023 Round 2

5.2 Continuing broadband expansion efforts through the Indiana Connectivity Program.

The Indiana Connectivity Program (ICP) aims to connect residents and businesses that lack access to broadband internet service with service providers and assist in the expense of extending broadband to those locations. The number of applications clearly indicates Hoosier's interest in broadband access. While the participation by both citizens and providers continue to increase, OCRA will develop marketing plans to reach areas where applications and bids have not been successful. To meet this increasing demand, the Broadband office will continue efforts to increase staff accordingly.

Potential partners: Governor Eric Holcomb's Office, Service Providers, Local Education Providers, DOE, IOT, PCR, IBO

Timeline: Ongoing

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

5.3 Identify unserved and underserved locations, and develop the next round of the Next Level Connections program.

OCRA will complete The Next Level Connections (NLC) Broadband Grant Program to provide access to reliable and affordable broadband service in all areas of the state. Based on experience in previous funding rounds, OCRA should identify areas where there is the greatest need for broadband service. The framework for NLC 4 will build upon investments already made through NLC to leverage the remaining funds to help close the Digital Divide.

Potential partners: Governor Eric Holcomb's Office, Service Providers, Local Education Providers, IDOH, DOE, IOT, PCRD, IBO

Timeline: Q2-Q3 2023

5.4 Incentivize the identification of opportunities to implement new programming and partnerships focused on green infrastructure and reducing the impact of extreme heat on low-income residents.

This spring, OCRA and Indiana University's Environmental Resilience Institute (ERI) will conclude a two-year program helping two Indiana rural communities develop and implement heat relief strategies and response protocols. The goal of the program is to create sustainable, long-term projects, programs and educational materials that help residents, especially those most vulnerable, cope with hot days and nights to decrease public health impacts.

Potential partners: Indiana University's Environmental Resilience Institute (ERI)

Timeline: Q4 2023